

“The Heart and Soul of the Gospel”

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Fort Street Presbyterian Church in Detroit, Michigan

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Good morning!

Before I begin the sermon, I’d like to reference the books listed on page four of your bulletin. Ideas and quotes from all three will appear during the sermon. I encourage you to spend time reading and reflecting on the ideas presented in these books. One book, written by CS Lewis, is fairly short. The collection of sermons by theologian Howard Thurman, is longer, but not a very long work and can easily be read over time. Theologian and Professor N.T. Wright’s biography of Paul is a longer work. If you’re not up to a long read, the high points of the book can be experienced by reading the introduction and conclusion. I’ve benefitted from reading all three of these books and I think you will benefit from them as well.

Let’s pray.

Thank you Lord for calling us into your kingdom, into your power, and into relationship and connection with you. Show us how to live the purposes for which we were created.

Show us how to live as authentic witnesses to the truth of your word.

Amen.

Passage from Colossians 1:9-14 (NIV)

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,^[a] ¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, ¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you^[b] to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Our text begins with the apostle saying..."for this reason."

What is the reason the writer references? For the answer, let's look at a previous statement made in this letter to the church at Colosse.

In the earlier portion of the chapter Paul says the faith, work, and spiritual fruit of the church in Colosse is well known to him, and to others. He mentions the love this congregation has shown to *all* believers. Paul says these church members have truly understood God's grace.

In this context, the apostle then explains a series of truths about the work of this church and our passage finishes with a summary statement that explains everything previously stated.

In this summary statement we find the heart and soul of the gospel: "*We have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of Jesus Christ, God's beloved son.*" (repeat)

Some of us refer to this experience as being converted, being born again, or being saved, or being redeemed. If this has been our experience---regardless of what we call it—we have a “before and after” story. In this “before and after” story rests the core of our ability to be authentic witnesses of Jesus Christ.

The word dominion here represents the idea of expressed power and authority. It represents rulership. The writer says as believers in and followers of Jesus Christ, we have been

rescued, or saved, from one power or authority into another power or authority.

We can't take credit for our experience of rescue, but we can enjoy the benefits of the rescue.

What is the dominion of darkness?

The dominion of darkness is defined by disconnection from God, disconnection from true relationships with others, and disconnection from our best selves (our God intended selves).

The experience of rescue implies inability to effectively act to save the self. Jesus Christ, God's son, rescues us from the state of disconnect, from life in the dominion of darkness.

In other words, we have experienced a transfer. This transfer is not only a change of status, it is a change of our character. It is a change of our life priorities. It is a change of our eternal destiny.

It is also a change of how we relate to God, how we relate to others, and how we relate to---and understand—ourselves.

The apostle explains what this change looks like. What are the markers of this change? Do we need to pay attention to these markers of change?

In the book of second Corinthians, Paul encourages what we today would call a “self-test”.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? 2 Corinthians 13:5 New International Version (NIV)

Let's look at the characteristics that made the Colossian church so successful. They were successful in sharing the gospel and loving all of God's people. They were successful in demonstrating the fruit of the Holy Spirit : But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22)

First, Paul encourages the church to live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way. For these Christ followers, their expression of connection to God is seen in their desire to please God, to live a life worthy of this kingdom they have been transferred into. What would this worthiness look like?

Paul wants these believers and followers to bear fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God. We've already heard (from the Galatians passage) how Paul speaks of fruit, of spiritual fruit. It's certainly not something we can accomplish on our own—despite our willpower, intelligence, natural abilities, or good intentions. Growing in the knowledge of God is what brings forward good fruit. As we

know more of who God truly is, we are more truly drawn to become close followers of God. In our own small ways, we begin to replicate the qualities of God. We begin to show others the love, mercy, grace, patience, and kindness we have experienced in connection with God.

Paul continues on, saying the believers and followers have been strengthened with all power, according to God's power. God's power, not ours, makes the difference. Our ability to do the work we have been given is never based on us alone, but on our connection with God. This is not unusual or difficult or reserved for a select few. This power lives within us because we are in connection with the maker and maintainer of all things.

Paul prays for the church. He prays continually. This “continual prayer” suggests there are always new things to do, new things to understand, new decisions to be made, new fears to conquer, new insights to explore, new joys to experience. There is no complacency here, no sense of being “good enough to get by” or of having “made it.”

Here, again from our text, Paul says what he prays for when he thinks about the church in Colosse. He prays that God will...

“...fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.”

The Holy Spirit gives wisdom AND understanding. What difference does this make? In wisdom we have truth; in

understanding we have the application and the expression of that truth.

In this expression of truth, we begin to experience connection with others and with our selves. Wholeness, or holiness, means we have a single (not conflicted) view of who we are, why we are in the world, and what we should do with our time, energy, and resources. These actions are not only for ourselves. These actions are for others as well—others that are known to us and others that are not known to us.

Howard Thurman (1899-1981, African-American theologian, pastor, world traveler, and writer) says we can more deeply understand God by examining the parable of the shepherd. God is the shepherd always seeking to find the lost sheep, those outside of communion and community. God is the God who restores connection and fellowship. Christianity is not the path of a Lone Ranger. It is the path of connection.

As God's followers, we seek what God seeks, what God wants for all people. God loves all people equally.

So what do we do with all of this?

We embrace and thankfully accept this truth: we have been empowered to live as authentic witnesses of Jesus Christ. We affirm through our life and our words everything Jesus says. He is the Light of the World. He is the Good Shepherd. He is the Gate for the Sheep. He is the Bread of Life. He is the Vine. He is the Way-the Truth-the Life. Finally, He is the Resurrection and the Life.

Because of these truths, our work is not tiresome or unimportant work. This is necessary work. This is the work of the whole person, of the holy person. This is work of eternal value.

The authentic witness has three qualities. The authentic witness has:

- 1. Something important to do,**
- 2. Something important to say,**
- 3. Something important to look forward to.**

WHAT DOES THE AUTHENTIC WITNESS HAVE TO DO?

The work of the authentic witness always moves self and community toward reconciliation in God, through Jesus Christ. (repeat) This is the unique message of the church.
The authentic witness is always learning, always growing, always seeking, always killing fear, and always expanding the scope of their dreams. All of this happens for the sake and goal of reconciliation in and with God. As we often say, we are reformed and always reforming.

WHAT DOES THE AUTHENTIC WITNESS HAVE TO SAY?

The speech of the authentic witness points to Jesus Christ as the unique revelation of how God actually feels about

humanity and all creation. (repeat) In Matthew 28, Jesus tells his disciples to make other disciples. He tells them to be authentic witnesses. True witnesses tell what they have seen or experienced, not what they're read, heard, or considered. Witnessing happens in the context of relationships. When Jesus tells his disciples to "go", He's really saying "go live your lives and while you're doing that, make more disciples."

WHAT DOES THE AUTHENTIC WITNESS HAVE TO LOOK FORWARD TO?

The future of the authentic witness is eternal, and is eternally with God. (repeat)

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963, British scholar and professor of medieval literature at both Oxford and Cambridge universities, atheist turned Christian, then Christian apologist) writes in the Screwtape Letters of the sudden and violent physical death of a young Christian convert during a bombing raid in WWII London.

The Screwtape Letters is an epistolary novel --a novel written in letters-- about the struggle between the forces of good and evil for a human soul. Near the end of the book, Lewis writes: "he (our young convert) got out (meaning left this present world) so easily, no nursing homes, no doctors that lie, no hospitals--- just sheer instantaneous liberation."

Those who have been rescued from the dominion of darkness have been brought into the experience of eternal life. Eternal life begins now, not after physical death. Jesus tells us this: those who believe in Him---even if their bodies appear gone, lost, lifeless, or destroyed—are always alive. We are always in Him and we are always with Him. God's work of rescue for His followers is total, complete, and eternal.

This is the heart and soul of the gospel.

Let's pray.

Lord, we are thankful you have called us into connection with you, with others, and with ourselves. Give us courage to be authentic witnesses of what we know. Free us from the fear of what others will say, think, or do. Make us always aware of your presence and your love. Amen.

